

The Tragedy of Macbeth, Act II, by William Shakespeare
Literary Analysis: Blank Verse

Blank verse consists of lines of poetry written in iambic pentameter. Each line contains five poetic feet of stressed and unstressed syllables. The form is flexible and versatile and can produce the effect of smooth, natural speech in a way that other metrical patterns cannot. For this reason, Shakespeare relied primarily on blank verse throughout his plays. However, Shakespeare occasionally used prose, especially for the speech of characters from lower stations in life. He also employed occasional rhymes when it seemed appropriate to a particular character: The witches in *The Tragedy of MacBeth*, for example, often speak in rhymes. Finally, like most dramatists of the English Renaissance, Shakespeare often used one or more rhymed lines of dialogue to signal that a scene had ended or that new players must make their entrances, in this way alerting offstage players or other members of the company.

Following is a series of passages from *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. On the line below each passage, identify it as “prose,” “rhyme,” or “blank verse.” Then scan the lines that are in blank verse by marking the stressed and unstressed syllables.

1. **SECOND WITCH.** When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

2. **ROSS.** I'll see it done.
KING. What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.

3. **ROSS.** The King hath happily received, Macbeth,
The news of thy success. And when he reads
Thy personal venture in the rebel's fight,
His wonders and his praises do contend
Which should be thine or his.

4. **LADY MACBETH (Reads).** They met me in the day of success; and I have learned by the perfect'st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished.
